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THE NATURE AND VALIDITY OF CONSCIENCE AND MORAL PRINCIPLE ¹

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With the guns of Flanders and Picardy shaking our deepest being, it has been almost impossible for us during the last two years to think at all. Thinking demands the calm hour and the dispassionate frame of mind, and no one of us has had many such hours or many such mental dispositions for some time past. But it is our duty as moral leaders in our respective communities to think as steadily and dispassionately as we can, so that our leadership shall be, not that of hysteria and emotion, but of a discriminating and inwardly controlled moral intelligence. To that end I invite your attention in this Berry Street Conference — so long devoted to serious discussion of vital topics — to a subject that seems to me of great, if not supreme, importance at the present time, namely, *The Nature and Validity of Conscience and Moral Principle*.

My thought has been turned to this subject by the presence in our midst of "the conscientious objector." Towards such persons we Unitarians, because of our traditions and principles, ought to be sympathetic beyond most religious bodies. Many of us in the name of conscience have left the churches and religious associations in which we were reared, given up fair prospects of ecclesiastical preferment, and joined ourselves to a small and unpopular religious fellowship. The heroes of conscience have furnished us the most important examples of the virtuous life as we have tried to interpret it to our congregations. The

¹ An address to the Berry Street Conference, Boston, May, 1918.

word "conscience," in our use of it, has always had associated with it a wealth of tender and exalted feeling. To say of a man that he was a man of conscience was regarded by us as almost the highest judgment we could pronounce upon him. To be true to conscience was thought to be the highest goal of our own moral ambition.

But the great war has come and complicated the inner life of the spirit. Some of us are moved by our consciences to offer ourselves, our sons, and our possessions to what we consider a holy crusade against the military brutality, the political aggressiveness, and the spiritual pride of an autocratic European government. We feel that to fail to come to the help of Belgium, France, Serbia, Armenia, and Russia in this time of woeful need would be to forfeit our manhood and to abandon the stricken people of the world to an endless slavery. If we do not entirely misread our own minds, we are supporting the government not because of the recrudescence of the fighting instinct in us, or because we have abandoned our hope and yearning for universal human brotherhood, but, on the contrary, because we believe that all that we, as Liberals, hold dear would be endangered by the triumph of the arms and the spirit of Germany. If our sons and the boys of our congregations who have gone to the front, should fall in this war, their memories will always be green in our hearts and homes and churches, and we shall think of them as young heroes who died to preserve to the world the liberties without which our lives thus far would have been impossible.

On the other hand, there are those who in the name of conscience take the very opposite stand. They see nothing noble in the war. For them a man's morality is compromised when he takes a gun in his hand or encourages others to do so. They can discover no glory but only tragedy in America's part in the war. Their citizenship has become to them something to be ashamed rather than proud of, they feel themselves isolated from the majority

of their former friends, and they are pained by that isolation, but conscience assures them that their position is morally sound and they maintain it in the face of opposition and entreaty. Each group appeals to the authority of conscience, and conscience leads them to opposite conclusions. All that is most holy and commanding and authoritative in one good man's heart urges, nay, drives him, into the war, and all that is most holy, commanding, and authoritative in another good man's heart forbids him to enter it.

In such a situation many old questions concerning conscience inevitably arise. What is conscience? Is its authority over the individual absolute and ultimate? Must it be respected by us even when it commands individuals to do things of which we deeply disapprove? Probably very little that is fresh can be said on these questions, but at least we are forced to ask them anew, and the old answers may have more meaning because of the very urgency of our need for them.

Few Unitarians can reflect on conscience without recalling the beautiful story from the child life of Theodore Parker:

"When a little boy in petticoats in my fourth year, one fine day in spring my father led me by the hand to a distant part of the farm, but soon sent me home alone. On the way I had to pass a little 'pond-hole,' then spreading its waters wide. A rhodora in full bloom, a rare flower in my neighbourhood which grew only in that locality, attracted my attention and drew me to the place. I saw a little spotted tortoise sunning himself in the shallow water at the root of the flaming shrub. I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, 'It is wrong!' I held back my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion, the consciousness of an involuntary but inward check upon my actions, till the tortoise and the rhodora both vanished from my sight. I hastened home and told the tale to my

mother, and asked what it was that told me it was wrong. She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and taking me in her arms said, 'Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you all in the dark and without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice.' "

Now what does this beautiful and appealing little bit of autobiography suggest as to the nature and origin of conscience? Undoubtedly it suggests the theory of Bishop Butler and others, that conscience is an innate, underived, unanalyzable, inexplicable, and universal power of moral discrimination, a special magisterial faculty, which has absolute and unquestioned authority over the individual. This faculty passes judgment on man and his actions, declaring, without the possibility of error or the possibility of appeal, that some actions are in themselves right, just, and good, and that others are in themselves evil, wrong, and unjust.

But in spite of the appeal which Intuitionism makes to the active moral nature, it can no longer be accepted as a satisfactory account of the nature, origin, and authority of conscience. It would be incorrect to say that the idea of faculties of the mind has been entirely abandoned in psychology, for so great a psychologist as William McDougall still manages to make a restricted use of it. But the old-fashioned way of describing the mind as consisting of a bundle of faculties, such as perception, imagination, conception, judgment, reason, will, etc., has lost all value for our present thought. If "faculty" be taken as meaning only a psychical capacity for an ultimate, irreducible, or unanalyzable mode of being conscious of objects, the mind truly has faculties. Knowing, feeling, and striving are such faculties, for they cannot be explained as a conjunction of more fundamental capacities. More-

over, each of these groups of mental dispositions may in turn be said to include a number of faculties. Striving seems to be of two ultimate kinds, namely, striving towards and striving away from an object or appetite and aversion. Feeling, again, seems to be of two ultimate kinds, namely, agreeable and disagreeable feeling. We may even recognize a variety of modes of knowing; for example, being aware of objects, affirming or denying objects, and comparing objects.

When I object to the Intuitionist view of conscience, then, as something ultimate and unanalyzable, I am not objecting to these words in themselves as having no meaning in psychology. I believe not only that the structure of the mind is ultimate and unanalyzable but the mind itself as well. I have no sympathy for the mode of thought which reduces intelligence to instinct, and instinct to compound reflex action, and reflex action to the irritability of protoplasm, and the irritability of protoplasm to tension in its different parts due to the incidence of impinging physical forces or to the chemical affinities of one element for another. So to explain the mind is to explain it away — never a satisfactory mode of procedure. Nor do I say that in our metaphysical thinking we may not legitimately conceive of something more ultimate than individual minds; but I feel that in all our thinking on the concrete problems of human life, it is inadvisable for us to begin with anything more ultimate than the mind itself. For us at least that mind and its structure are ultimate and irreducible.

But it is one thing to admit that there are ultimate and irreducible faculties, and another thing to show that conscience is such a faculty. History makes it perfectly plain that conscience does not command the same acts or reprimand equally for the same misdeeds. Conscience forbids the Hindu to eat meat, but the Christian conscience is silent in this regard. The content of the Roman Catholic conscience differs profoundly in many matters from the

content of the Protestant conscience. One type of conscience lies back of political and social conservatism, and another type lies back of political and social radicalism. Conscience may command in the same individual different kinds of conduct at different periods of life.

Moreover, conscience, as we all experience it, is by no means the infallible guide which it is sometimes said to be. Life is full of new and complicated situations which it does not help us to meet. It certainly does not reveal to us on all occasions with subjective certainty or objective infallibility what duty demands. It may be adequate for the solution of the more common problems of life, such as the community has long been dealing with, but the more novel and delicate situations of experience demand an insight and a wisdom which conscience cannot give. Just as habit cannot take the place of selective and creative consciousness, so conscience cannot take the place of analytic reflection and fresh moral insight.

Remembering then the obvious differences in the contents of conscience as it manifests itself in different groups and its obvious defects from the point of view of infallibility, it becomes impossible for us to use uncritically the definition of Parker's mother, "Conscience is the voice of God in the soul of man"; or the similar notion of Butler that conscience is a sort of inner oracle, imposing its decrees by divine right on the human will; or the general intuitionist belief that it is a special faculty, of which nothing more can be said than that it is and that it must be obeyed. Hence we are driven back to ask over again what it is and how it came to be.

If conscience is not a special faculty, what is it? When we recall that conscience and consciousness have the same derivation, we find the clue of which we are in search. If consciousness be defined as the sense we have of ourselves as realized in knowledge, then conscience may be defined as the sense we have of ourselves as realized in conduct.

Conscience is nothing more and nothing less than a man's whole personality when he engages in moral action or makes a moral judgment. Conscience is the self making moral judgments, or the self realizing itself in and adjusting itself to human relations. As such it includes all the fundamental capacities or activities or faculties of the mind. It contains a cognitive element, for it estimates the rightness or wrongness of actions in accordance with some standard or ideal intellectually conceived and formulated. But it also contains an element of feeling, for all moral judgments and adjustments are accompanied by emotions of greater or less intensity. Remorse, for example, which is possible only to a person of conscience, is one of the most violent, as the sense of satisfaction which follows right action is one of the most pleasing of human emotions. And, finally, it contains an element of volition; for conscience inhibits us from doing many things which impulse suggests and it urges us on to duty when the spontaneous impulse towards it flags. The self of man is many-sided. It has economic, social, aesthetic, cognitive, moral, and religious interests; but these are all aspects and functionings of one self. Of course the self sometimes seems and is divided against itself. One group of impulses conflicts with another group. Even one duty comes into conflict with another duty. But above all these conflicting impulses and motives, there is, in every normal person, what we call a real self, a master self which, given time enough, will control and dominate all the lower selves. This real or master or higher self is none other than conscience — the self as regulative of conduct, pronouncing cognitively on the rightness or wrongness of acts, experiencing certain moral emotions as its ends are realized or not, and checking impulse or reinforcing it as the particular occasion may demand.

When conscience is thus defined as the self making moral judgments, it is soon evident that our second ques-

tion, How did conscience come to be? is practically unanswerable. No one has ever succeeded in telling the story of the genesis of the individual self. When did the self come into being? At the hour of conception, or of birth, or at the moment when the child towards the end of his third year first uses the pronoun *I*, or when? No one can answer. No more can anyone say how children of the same parents, born in the same home and reared in the same environment, have different selves. Origins are mostly hidden from us, and certainly the origin of the self is.

But though the origin of the self as conscience is inexplicable, it is not difficult to see that the content of conscience is generally due to social environment. Conscience is for the most part the voice of the community speaking to and in and through the individual. Even the greatest philosopher has his main problems set for him by the life of his time. His thinking is inevitably carried on in a specific social medium. His language is an inheritance, and in using it he must submit to the shaping influence of the past. Consciousness is always individual, in the sense that it is never a mere part of a social or race consciousness and can never appropriate a community's spiritual gains without going through some of the processes by which they were achieved. Consciousness is always unique. But the objects of which it is conscious are social objects, and one person's reactions to the common social objects are inevitably of essentially the same nature as those of others. There would be no common social life at all if *blue* and *sweet* and *hard* and *round* and a thousand other common words did not mean essentially the same for all. The individual mind is not a mere piece of the race's mind; but still no individual ever escapes altogether from the idiosyncracies and limitations of his race's mentality.

So is it with conscience. It is unique in the sense that my conscience is mine and yours yours. It is for each one of

us a pressure on conduct which is exercised from within his own mind. But the content of conscience, its judgments as to right and wrong, the standards and ideals by which it judges conduct, are for the most part social or community standards and ideals. Take a cross section of the conscience of average men and women at any time or place, and we shall find that its content is more collective than individual. Certain individuals doubtless had originally more to do than others with the creation of the social standards and ideals, but, once created, the average individual judges his conduct by them without any inquiry as to their source or the legitimacy of their authority. If the collective conscience is infallible, his may be so also; but if the collective conscience is liable to error, as all history shows it to be, then his conscience is still more fallible. We should always respect conscience in the sense that we should never urge men to act against it, but we should strive to make men see that their moral judgments, like their cognitive judgments, are liable to error and that conscience is always in need of education and revision.

I have said that for the most part conscience is the voice of the community speaking in the individual. But of course that is not the whole truth. In the realm of knowledge a few individuals acquire a mastery of their mental processes and of the methods of investigation, experiment, generalization, etc., which enables them to be independent of the judgments of the average person altogether. True, science is never anything more than common sense extended and systematized and become critical of itself, but the advantage it has over common sense is so great that the scientist's system of concepts seems at first to have no relationship at all with the mere rule-of-thumb generalizing of the average man.

The same is true of the self as conscience. The individual may become independent of the conscience of his community. A more inward and, as it seems to him, a more

commanding and a higher voice may begin to speak to him, condemning acts of which his community approves and urging him to acts which his community condemns. The history of morality and religion is full of the stories of men whose consciences have been thus individualized. Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah among the prophets, Jesus and Paul in the New Testament, St. Francis and Luther in subsequent Christian history, Mazzini, W. Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Parker, and Henry George among social reformers, are conspicuous instances of such individualizing of conscience. They break away from the conventional morality of their community and achieve a moral elevation and independence which make them heroes for all time. So dramatic has been the awakening of the individual conscience in some cases that it has seemed more like the call of Deity to the prophetic soul than the sudden maturing of some subjective insight and impulse that has long been developing in the subconscious mind. If ever conscience can be spoken of as absolutely individual, that is, as without any social mediation or as the voice of God in the soul of man, or as perfect and infallible, surely it is in cases such as these.

But is the highly individualized conscience necessarily arrived at without any social mediation? Is the individual's community necessarily confined to those he knows in the flesh? May he not live in a world peopled by the saints and heroes and prophets of the histories, poems, stories, and sacred scriptures he has read? It would be impossible, of course, to demonstrate this in every specific case, for few moral and spiritual biographies are known to us in their entirety. But it is hard to doubt that it always is the case. The individual self achieves self-consciousness through the give and take of social life. And in this social interaction ideal and historical persons may be just as real as, indeed much more real than, one's flesh-and-blood acquaintances, and through spiritual contact with these per-

sonages the individual conscience may get a content very different from the content of his community conscience. We do well when we insist on the fact that the conscience of the individual may outgrow in many respects the conscience of his neighbors, but we yield too far to our craving for uniqueness when we insist that the more inward and commanding conscience is attained by turning our backs on our fellows altogether. We often speak of being alone with our conscience and our God, and there is a sense in which this is true. But whenever we are, our self has always its social implications. The self with which we pray in our closets is a self made up of sentiments, affections, regrets, aspirations, and hopes of which we have become possessed through our interaction with other human beings, just as the system of concepts by means of which we think in our quietest and most solitary hours in our libraries is the product of our intellectual commerce with many other minds both living and dead. I am just as eager as any one to defend the uniqueness of the individual mind and conscience. But I am persuaded that we compromise rather than protect that uniqueness when we think of it as abstract and achieved without social mediation. There is, I grant, no social mind of which the individual is only a detached fragment, like a chip from a statue. Every individual mind is unique. But there is no individual mind that has not been conceived and developed within the matrix of the social mind. No more is there an individual conscience that has developed outside of all relationship with the moral life of humanity. The genius in the intellectual world does hit out thoughts and hypotheses which no one ever uttered just in that way before, but they are always the culmination of mental processes which have been going on in many other minds as well as his own. He only anticipates the vision of others, and when he announces his vision it is caught up by an ever-increasing school of disciples, that is, persons whose

thoughts were already moving in the same direction. Likewise, the genius in the moral world achieves ethical insight and conviction which no one before had ever achieved, but, like Jesus, he always nourishes his moral nature on the insights of preceding prophets, and his own unique ethical contribution is a flowering of those insights in his personality and his teaching.

And if there is no individual conscience that has not been attained by way of social mediation, so no individual conscience is infallible in its own right. The dogmatist in the intellectual world is the man who continues to believe in his own cognitive judgments even when they fail year after year to receive the approval of his intellectual peers. Of course he may be right, and in that case he is not a dogmatist; but human minds are built pretty much on the same ground-plan, and if any individual fails to convince his open-minded peers, it is much saner for him not to be too sure of his judgment but to study the whole problem afresh and try to feel the force of others' criticisms.

Nor is it essentially different with conscience. If a highly individualized conscience can only grow up within and by means of the moral life of humanity, the highest test of its worth must be, not alone the degree of its subjective certainty, but also its power to persuade and convince those other souls whose movement of purpose and aspiration, like his own, is ever upward. There may be fanaticism in the moral as there is dogmatism in the intellectual world, and they derive from the same psychical source. Failing to see that both conscience and thought are socially mediated, people refuse to test them by social standards. Especially is this the case in regard to conscience. The individual conscience seems to them so holy that it carries authority for them in its own right. But the holiness of conscience is not due to its occupying any unique place among our so-called faculties. As a faculty conscience is no more holy than cognition, but since it

deals with conduct, the most important part of life, it acquires an aspect of holiness which cognition seldom if ever acquires. If knowledge seemed to us of supreme importance, cognition would become our holiest faculty; but knowledge has always been thought to be secondary to good will and right conduct and holy aspiration, and therefore cognition seems and for all practical purposes is less divine than conscience.

I am well aware that what I am saying, unless carefully stated and carefully followed, may seem calculated to undermine the authority of the individual conscience and to cut away the ground from individuality altogether. But that at least is not my intention. I care not how far one may carry the thought of differentiation among human individuals — indeed the further it is carried the better I am pleased — provided it is always acknowledged that it is the differentiation of a continuum. The idea of the continuity of the individual with humanity must be conserved unless we are going to abandon ourselves to a pluralism that would make even the thought of society impossible. The individual as a highly differentiated member of society I can most heartily believe in, but the individual as a human atom, as the possessor of so-called natural rights, as endowed with a conscience which makes it possible for him to pronounce infallibly on questions of right and wrong without interaction with the social mind, I can neither understand nor believe in. The pluralist would shatter society into a multitude of independent human atoms; the absolutist would merge all individuals in the whole, and treat them as mere temporary modes of the eternal, as the waves are mere temporary conformations of the water of the sea; but the more critical thinker will seek to preserve both values. He will think of differentiation and continuity not as opposites but correlatives. He will see that the individual has rights only as a member of society; that his cognitive judgments can be

considered valid only in so far as they succeed, given time enough, in carrying conviction to his intellectual peers; and that his conscience gets whatever infallibility it has from the fact that he has absorbed into himself and carried to a completer fulfillment the moral impulses and insights which he, as a member of society, has inherited from the past and appropriated from the living present.

And what is true of conscience is equally true of what we call moral principle. This word too has romantic associations in our thought. Fidelity to principle is regarded by all of us as one of our supreme human virtues. We are never done extolling it over against expediency or the tendency to compromise. And when we realize what a moral principle is, we see why we prize fidelity to it so highly. For a moral principle is a persistent deliverance of the conscience of the best people of society. It is a generalized expression of the moral experience of whole generations of men and women, and no part of our inheritance is more precious than the complex of sentiments, reverences, loyalties, and affections which we call the moral life of the past.

But here again we must be on our guard. Principles must not be treated in an abstract fashion. A moral principle is always someone's interpretation of personal and social welfare, and it gets its sacredness from the character of the purpose at which it aims. But no individual's interpretation of welfare and no generation's interpretation of welfare can be strictly regarded as infallible. Indeed, we may go further and say that the entire race's past interpretation of welfare may be inadequate to our present and future needs. The human race is always undergoing new experiences, and never more so than in the present; whole nations are now being subjected to griefs and perplexities and the bitterest necessities, which no preceding generation could possibly have predicted; the relations between the old social classes are being and will continue

to be revolutionized. And if moral principles are good men's interpretations of human welfare, is it inconceivable that the insight of the past may not be entirely adequate to the demands of the present and the future? Moral principles are a precious part of our inheritance, but they are, not so much coins to be preserved just as they are when we receive them, as seeds to be planted in the soil of our own time. The system of concepts in the scientific and philosophical world which we inherit from the past is indispensable to our intellectual life. To repudiate that system would be to find ourselves once again in the flux and chaos of the primitive man's unorganized sensations. But that inherited system of concepts is not an arbitrary group of abstract words. It is the living body of our thought, and as such must be forever sloughing off dead tissue and renewing its life by fresh experiences and fresh interpretations of old experience. "Die to live" is the principle which prevails in all living thought-systems.

So must it be in moral systems as well. Principles are not fixed and rigid guideposts to conduct. They are general summaries of experience; and as experience is always growing and changing, principles must be at least as flexible as the movement of the moral life itself. Fidelity to principle is not a fanatical loyalty to the letter of ethical commands, such as is involved in the common sayings about "hewing to the line, let the chips fall where they may," or "do justice, though the heavens fall." Rather fidelity to principle is faithfulness to those movements that one believes to be making for human welfare. Moral life is a living process in the souls of men, and that process must answer to the changing environment in which each generation finds itself. It may at any moment in its history be fairly well gathered up and expressed in maxims and precepts and proverbs and principles; but we become moral, not as we faithfully conform to these principles, but as we feel in our souls and realize in our lives the social

sentiments and loyalties and affections which constitute the living process of morality.

It is perfectly possible that some may conclude that what I have said means essentially a throwing open of the doors to compromise and expediency. It may be thought that as primitive man needed what Bagehot called "a rigid crust of custom," so men today need fixed and inflexible moral principles to guide them in this period of moral and political chaos. I agree that such fixed principles may be of great advantage at a certain period in our moral development; but for us that period is surely past. We are today confronted by a new world situation; social adjustments vaster than we had ever predicted must be made in the course of the next few years; the moral life must be expanded as it never has been before to include in its sweep all nations of men. And as we face this fateful future, we must all be anxious about our equipment for duty and opportunity. To say that we must abandon conscience and moral principle would be irrational, for that would be tantamount to saying that the past has nothing to teach us concerning the future. But I do say that we must abandon our abstract view of conscience and moral principle and our tendency to treat them as stereotyped solutions of all our moral problems. Our supreme guides must be, not a lot of ready-made principles and intuitions, but good will, the desire to coöperate, willingness to do whatever the social welfare demands, insight into the mighty forces for good and evil that the war has let loose, sanity in discriminating between the possible and the impossible, and a will to believe and a will to persevere that nothing can daunt or overwhelm.

We are undoubtedly moving towards a future big with destiny. Let us go out to meet it, not with a few abstract ethical formulas about justice and democracy and equality and natural rights, but with a living mind, a mind in vital interaction with the minds of other men and women,

a mind open to the teaching of the events amid which we live, a mind that is willing to be tentative and experimental because it knows, as Professor John Dewey says, that there is no such thing as complete moral maturity, and that all persons are still more or less children in process of learning moral distinctions; in a word a mind that follows the movement of life itself, never changing in its purpose of getting forward, but ever feeling after new ways and means of reaching the goal.